

Testimony to the Select Committee on Children

Public Hearing Re: S.B. 153-An Act Providing a Safe Harbor for Exploited Children

Submitted by Christina Tawadros

February 23, 2010

Good afternoon Senator Musto, Representative Urban, and members of the Children's Committee.

I am here today to testify on Bill S.B. 153: An Act Providing a Safe Harbor for Exploited Children.

My name is Christina Tawadros and I am currently a Graduate student at the University Of Connecticut School Of Social Work. I am here to testify to support S.B. 153 to stop persecuting victims of child sexual trafficking as criminals and providing these young people with protection and social services.

I came out today to speak out about my concern for the children in Connecticut. Children under the age of seventeen are presently criminalized as perpetrators of prostitution instead of being treated as victims of sex trafficking when having engaged in sexual acts for money. Despite the fact that, under Connecticut State Law, children under the age of 16 cannot consent to sex, young children are routinely charged and incarcerated for prostitution. Connecticut needs to stop treating exploited children like criminals and provide them with services and safe houses, not jail cells.

The way the law is currently written is blaming the victims who are sexually exploited by both traffickers and the adults buying the sex of minors. Children get re-traumatized when being arrested and tried in court, reducing their chances to have productive lives of opportunities when being given a criminal record.

When many of us think of sex trafficking, we think of women and children being transported from place to place, often from outside the country. All around the world, we hear of horrific stories of children sold for sex such as in the case in rural villages of Cambodia, Thailand, Philippines and other parts of South East Asia. And while we hear about these stories, we never think to fathom that such heinous crimes could happen right here in our own neighborhoods. Furthermore, when it does happen (because it does) we punish the poor children that have been victims of this exploitation. I ask you, how does this make sense?

On the surface it may seem that if a person is selling their body for sex they should be prosecuted. However, these children are forced or coerced into sexual acts. I am asking you to see the serious implications of such a law and how that re-traumatizes the young people that are thrown into jail.

I am not a parent, but I am an older sister and aunt of young children. I plead to all parents and anyone who cares about the well-being of the younger generation of the State of Connecticut. Child victims of commercial sexual exploitation deserve to be given a chance for a better life free from abuse. I urge you to revise S.B. 153 to stop prosecuting victims of child sex trafficking but rather recognize their vulnerability and provide them the necessary services that will build the children of Connecticut.

Thank you for your time and would be happy to try to answer any questions.